

Patrolling the Green Line

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In 'Operations Other Than War' units are often assigned tasks that bear little resemblance to their normal duties.

During the early stages of Operation RESTORE HOPE, the 81mm mortar platoon of Battalion Landing Team 2/9 was tasked with the vital mission of providing security for the maritime prepositioning ship (MPS) offload taking place in the "Old Port" of Mogadishu.

The platoon landed by helicopter early on the morning of 9 December 1993 and set up its weapons in a position midway between the port and the airfield. That night we received orders to displace to the port to assist Company F in securing that area, a task that had assumed immense proportions. By first light on 10 December, one section had set up mortars in the port, the other section was providing security. Within a few hours the MPS *Jack Lummus* had docked and began offloading.

Within a day or two of our arrival it became apparent that indirect fire would not be a player in this environment, which, despite intermittent firing in the port area, had proved relatively benign. The use of high-explosive rounds in as densely populated an area as Mogadishu was obviously out of the question, and any situation prompting a request for illumination would be over by the time the first round was out. On the other hand it was clear that security was still a problem in the area surrounding the port. While the 81mm mortar platoon and Company F, (replaced on 14 December by a company of military police) physically occupied the port itself and the prison immediately adjacent to it, there were still several buildings overlooking the port from which the area could be brought under fire. Concern about this was clearly justified; the last ship to attempt to dock prior to the *Lummus* had been driven off by artillery fire, and just before Christmas a French ship was hit by rounds fired from a .50 caliber machinegun.

For the first few days the area outside the port gates was still, in the words of

one senior officer, "The Wild West." Gunfire was frequently heard, the rounds impacting within the port on several occasions. Just over 1 kilometer to the east lay the "Green Line," the scarred buffer zone demarcating the boundary between the territories of Aidid and Mahdi, Mogadishu's two principal warlords. Machinegun fire and the occasional crash of heavier caliber weapons could be heard coming from this area both day and night.



On 13 December one of our patrols was shot at on the Green Line, and this became a common occurrence over the course of the following week. On the same day, several Somalis grabbed the point man from another patrol in this area to prevent him from going down a side street, claiming that gunmen had set up an ambush.

When Company F departed for the airfield, the 81mm mortar platoon, together with the BLT's reconnaissance platoon, took over full responsibility for patrolling the area surrounding the port. A reduced company of military police

had arrived with the 1st Force Service Support Group (1st FSSG), but their responsibility was to man the front gates and provide internal security for the port compound. This was no small task. As FSSG Marines began to fill the main warehouse and the surrounding area, their gear became a target for bands of marauding children, intent on looting whatever they could, and whose methods displayed both determination and innovation.

Until 28 December the 81mm platoon conducted extensive patrols throughout the area within a 1,500-meter radius of the port. These patrols had three objectives:

- To establish a security buffer around the port and control the key terrain, especially in the north where the Green Line jagged west.
- To secure the goodwill of the local populace.
- To gather intelligence, mainly human intelligence and the observations of Marines recorded during patrol debriefs.

Providing Security

Security operations involved primarily the four different activities discussed below:

- **Foot Patrols:** Two patrols would be dispatched with a 10- to 15-minute interval along parallel or converging routes. Ideal size for these patrols was 8-10 Marines. Any more became burdensome in the narrow and crowded streets. Sometimes, especially after taking fire, these patrols would leave stay-behind teams in designated buildings. The principal disadvantage of these was the lack of surprise. Invariably, the gunmen would be signaled of our approach, giving them ample opportunity to hide their weapons.
- **Combined Mobile/Foot Patrols:** In an attempt to solve the problem mentioned previously, a patrol would leave the port area and drive via a roundabout

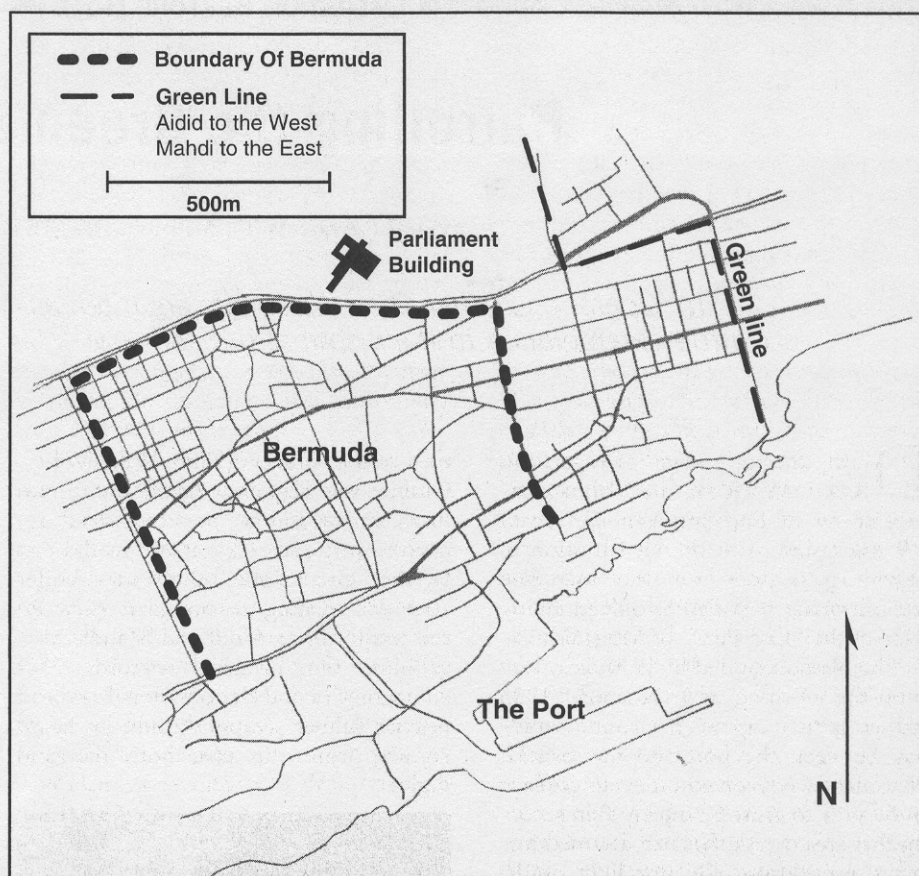
route to a designated area where they would dismount and clear the area.

- *Observation Posts/Listening Posts (OPs/LPs):* These normally consisted of 8-man teams that were positioned on key buildings overlooking the port.

- *Mobile LPs (night):* This would consist of an 8-man patrol in a HMMWV. They would drive along the Green Line stopping frequently. At some point they would dismount and take up position in a building, to be picked up a couple of hours later and moved on to another location.

As already mentioned, for the first few days the area surrounding the port was chaotic. From 13–20 December our patrols were shot at frequently, mostly in the vicinity of the Parliament Building, an imposing edifice overlooking the port about 1,100 meters to the north.

On 20 December a patrol in this area came under sniper fire. The source of this fire could not be located so the patrol was sent back to the port leaving a stay-behind team in the parliamentary building. Within 10–15 minutes a technical vehicle approached the Parliament Building and three or four gunmen got out. Upon being challenged, the gunner swung a .50 caliber machinegun mounted in the vehicle towards the Marines who, in turn, opened fire. The technical sped away. Human intelligence disclosed that two gunmen had been killed in this incident, but this was never confirmed. It is significant that after this incident no more



shots were fired at any of our patrols. In addition to this, once we had stepped up the patrolling there was a dramatic decrease in the number of shots fired in the immediate vicinity of the port.

By the end of our stay in the port area,

children from the pro-Mahdi area of Bermuda were crossing the Green Line and playing around the parliamentary building, a hitherto unknown occurrence. I would attribute this increase in stability, at least in part, to our extensive security efforts; the local populace were in firm agreement.

Securing the Goodwill of the Locals

One of the biggest problems in U.S.-Somali relations in the area stemmed from the fact that the district known as Bermuda, immediately north of the port, a Mahdi enclave in Aidid territory, was short of both food and water. All the markets and major water sources lay in the area controlled by the opposing warlord, and the residents of Bermuda could not cross the Green Line without risking their lives. Their high expectations upon the arrival of U.S. forces rapidly turned into disappointment and then resentment as they repeatedly saw food convoys headed inland, seemingly impervious to their needs.

From a security standpoint this was a potential problem



since the Bermuda district encompassed a large portion of our area of operation. To win the populace back we ran our own modest civic action program. We would take a motorized patrol to a section of Bermuda and distribute food obtained (legally) from the FSSG. At the same time the platoon corpsmen, assisted by Marines under their direction, would set up a makeshift aid station. Obviously, we could not offer the extensive medical treatment that some of these people needed, but intentions won us a lot of support and a significant amount of intelligence. On a small scale, this meant the local children warning us of the location of the "morvan"—as the Somalis called the armed bandits who roamed the Green Line. On a larger scale, we came to know the elders of the area and the names of the various clans, including the name of the faction that had been shooting at us.

Gathering Intelligence

This topic has already been covered in the discussion of the patrols themselves. Patrol debriefs were attended by a member of the combat intelligence team based at the port. These debriefs and the intro-

ductions we made for them provided them with their chief source of intelligence. One of the more important contacts was a meeting with local elders arranged by the reconnaissance platoon commander. All reports were forwarded to the Joint Task Force Headquarters.

Conclusion

The experience confirmed for me the belief that small-unit operations, patrolling in particular, are the key to low-intensity conflict operations in an urban

environment. Getting to know the area and local inhabitants is vital. In accomplishing this, foot patrols are the preferable method. In all the dealings with the locals, it was essential that Marines appeared calm, confident, and friendly. Visible nervousness on our part was a major problem at first. The Somalis quickly picked up on this. Without the locals on our side we would have lost our main source of intelligence along with our justification for being there. At the same time when confronted with a hostile act, it was essential to act quickly and aggressively—hardly a new lesson, but one worth emphasizing.

Mogadishu, to be sure, was no Hue City, but there were real dangers and the presence of these brought out the best in the Marines. Great attention was paid to individual movement and continuing actions. The Marines showed humanity and restraint in their dealings with the locals, and courage and self-discipline when confronted with hostile acts. Though not operating in the primary role for which they had been trained, their performance would have brought great credit to any platoon of riflemen.

USMC

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